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All sides in Nicaragua play to US public

Abduction of US activists is latest example of how 'contra' groups and ruling Sandinistas themselves try to manipulate US opinion

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"It was a real circus."

That remark was made by a high-level source among the "contras" fighting Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. It sums up the reaction of many observers in the region to the abduction and quick release of 29 US Christian activists and 18 newsmen by forces aligned with contra leader Edén Pastora Gomez.

The abduction was seen as a publicity gesture in a part of the world that seems to be producing more and more "fake news" — aimed principally at consumption by the United States public.

The gesture was seen as an attempt by Mr. Pastora to show that, although his faction is growing weaker after having been cut off from US government funding, it is still a military presence in the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border area.

The US Central Intelligence Agency stopped backing Pastora last year after he refused to unite with another contra faction, the US-backed, pro-Somocista Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

Contra sources say Pastora had to release the captives quickly under massive pressure from both the US and his supporters.

Adding to the near-farcical aspects of the abduction, the band belonging to Pastora's group which had abducted the Americans tried to disguise its identity by saying it was allied with neither Pastora nor the Nicaraguan Democratic Force but was, rather, a new and independent right-wing contra splinter group.

In the end the abduction proved to be more of a publicity boon for the Sandinistas than for anyone else. Stressing that all of the contra factions either currently, or until fairly recently, received financial assistance from the US, the front pages of the Nicaraguan press spoke of "Reagan's hostages."

The abduction of the Witness for Peace activists illustrates that more and more so-called "news items" in the area are basically media events aimed at manipulating public opinion in the US.

US public opinion has become the principal silent actor in the area, since it is viewed as the key to breaking the impasse in which the contending Nicaraguan forces find themselves.

The contras cannot overthrow the Sandinistas. They think their only chance to do so lies in a US invasion of Nicaragua. As they see it, the main obstacle to such an invasion is US public opinion.

Conversely, the Sandinistas know their only key to continued survival also lies in the hands of the US public. Political analysts in Washington and Central America say that, although the Reagan administration would probably invade Nicaragua if it could do so easily, it has not done so yet because it fears the domestic political consequences of such an act.

Thus, "John Q. Public" has become the target of various degrees of attempted news manipulation by the contras and the Reagan administration, on the one hand, and the



Pastora: trying to show that his faction is still factor

A. NORMAN MATHEW — STAFF

Sandinistas on the other.

Examples of acts directed in part at US public consumption abound. Among them are Pastora's recent disappearance after a helicopter crash near the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border, and the recently ended hunger strike of Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto Brockman.

One of the more memorable media events was the dramatic flurry of accusations that emerged from Washington after the Nicaraguan elections last November that East-bloc ships carrying Soviet MIGs were about to land in Nicaragua. Other instances that were largely "media shows" include many of the peace offers and public attempts at negotiation by both the US and the Sandinistas.

However, a more dangerous kind of news manipulation may be in the offing.

Many contra leaders say the best way to provoke a US invasion would be to create increasingly serious border incidents between Nicaragua and democratic, unarmed Costa Rica.

With much real fighting going on in the area between the Sandinistas and the contras, it will be more and more difficult to tell fact from fiction.